

# Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*: a tragedy of compassion

Patrick Finglass

We often take pity on the characters of Greek tragedy. But what happens when they take pity on others? Here Patrick Finglass explores the dynamics of compassion in the most famous Greek tragedy of all.

## Taking pity on Thebes

When Oedipus first addresses the audience at the start of *Oedipus the King*, he stands before them as a man of unparalleled ability – and of unparalleled confidence in that unparalleled ability. He is the conqueror of the Sphinx, the rescuer of Thebes, always the smartest guy in the room:

*Children, ancient Cadmus' latest offspring, why are you sitting like this before me, wreathed in suppliant branches? The city is full of incense, full of prayers to the gods, and of groaning. Not thinking it right, my children, to hear these things from messengers, I have come here myself, Oedipus famous in the sight of all, as I am called. Come, tell me, old man, since it is proper for you to speak on behalf of these people, in what state are you – one of fear, or of desire? Speak out, since I want to help you in every way. For I would be callous indeed if I felt no compassion at such a supplication.*

But by the end of the performance, it has become clear that he has lived his life in complete ignorance of even the most basic facts about himself: he has killed his father, married his mother, and brought into the world a brood of literally misbegotten offspring. A true figure of pity. Yet at the opening, Sophocles' Oedipus is not the pitied, but the pitier; not the object of compassion, but the one showing compassion for others. Though central to the play, this reversal is often neglected: it is worth taking a closer look at what it might tell us about Sophocles' masterpiece.

## No supplication needed

At the opening, Oedipus' audience consists of a group of children at an altar, guided by a Priest; they have all gathered to beg for Oedipus' assistance against a plague which is ravaging the city of Thebes. This moving tableau indicates a supplication scene – a common means of opening a tragedy, found in plays such as Euripides' *Children of Heracles*, *Suppliant Women*, and *Heracles*, and no doubt in many others now lost. In such scenes a group of defenceless people implores the assistance of a more powerful individual who has the power to grant their request. Usually winning that individual over is a difficult task; the group's spokesman must use all the rhetorical force he can muster in the face of the authority figure's considerable reluctance to act. This case, however, breaks the paradigm.

To begin with, Oedipus' concern for his people is immediately evident from his emotional words:

*your grief comes to each one of you alone, and to no-one else, but my soul groans for the city, for you, and for me. So you do not rouse me slumbering in sleep; no, be sure that I have wept many tears and travelled many roads in the wanderings of thought.*

But it can also be seen from his actions: far from needing to be persuaded to act, he has already sent his brother-in-law Creon on a mission to discover what the situation demands. And when he later encounters resistance from Tiresias, his rage is prompted not by tyrannical excess but by his passion for his fellow-citizens, something that moves the prophet not at all. This is a man whose very emotions are aligned with the interests of his people.

## Oedipus' 'tragic virtue'

Yet Oedipus' humane concern for others – the same characteristic that marks him out as an able ruler and profoundly sympathetic man – will turn out to be a cause of his destruction. Striving for a cure for the plague leads him to consult the oracle at Delphi, who tells him to punish the killers of Laius by execution or by exile; striving to obey the oracle's command out of his love for his people causes Oedipus to pursue an investigation that in the end leads to his self-conviction, and worse. So by receiving this supplication, indeed by agreeing to its request even before he was asked, Oedipus unknowingly sets in motion the chain of events leading to his own downfall. And seeing that process through to the end, against all kinds of opposition – from Tiresias, from Jocasta, and eventually from the key witness, the Theban Herdsman – will require a degree of courage that could scarcely have been anticipated when he began; it also massively exceeds the bravery shown by the authority figures in the other suppliant plays of Greek tragedy. The king is brought down, then, not by a tragic flaw, but what we might even think of as a tragic virtue.

## The power of pity

The prominence of pity as a driving force at the start of a work is not typical of tragedy, but is abundantly paralleled in archaic epic. In the *Odyssey*, the pity for Odysseus shown by the gods sets in motion his release from Calypso's island and his eventual return home. Near the start of the *Iliad*, compassion for mortal suffering prompts Hera to send Athena to intervene in the Greek camp to stop the plague, which results in the argument between Achilles and Agamemnon that almost brings the Greek cause to disaster. It is also there in less well-known works. For example, in the epic *Cypria*, Zeus causes the Trojan war out of pity for the goddess Earth, because she is oppressed by the weight of humanity. Or, at the start

of Stesichorus' *Sack of Troy*, Athena pities the ordinary servant Epeius, who every day had to carry water for the Greek kings, and so she leads him to fashion the Wooden Horse, which – as we know – will result in the capture of Troy.

Pity (ἔλεος or οἶκτος in the Greek) was, of course, the emotion which tragedy was thought to instill in its audience. Aristotle claimed in his *Poetics* – a work which specifically praises *Oedipus the King* – that pity, along with fear, was stimulated by tragedy; and before him, the fifth-century rhetorician Gorgias of Leontini and Plato had both commented on the power of poetry to cause this emotion. The fame and influence of Aristotle's treatise has ensured lasting interest in the pity felt by the audience of Greek tragedy for the events that it witnesses on stage; by contrast, the pity which the characters of tragedy feel within the world of the plays has remained relatively understudied.

### A cause of catastrophe

When we look at pity in the epics referred to above, what seems a tender and considerate emotion often leads to chaos and destruction. In the *Iliad*, Achilles' withdrawal from the fighting causes countless deaths; in the *Cypria*, mass slaughter follows on both sides of the Trojan War; in Stesichorus, Athena's pity leads to the bloody sack of an ancient city. In these epic instances, however, the pity is felt by the gods, and as a result the destruction which follows might be considered part of some appalling divine plan; the gods know what they are doing. Oedipus, on the other hand, is not a god. And so the forces of destruction released by his compassion – forces that will destroy him too – cannot have been anticipated by him.

A key aspect of pitying someone in the ancient world is the recognition of similarity between yourself and the person upon whom you are taking pity; the recognition that you too could suffer as they do, and that therefore it would be prudent to feel sorry for them now. Ironically, it is precisely thanks to his compassion that Oedipus will suffer a fate far worse than that of the people he pities at the start of the play. What we have in Sophocles' drama is thus something even more twisted and horrific than the destruction wrought by tender pity in these earlier epics.

### The circle of tragedy

Oedipus is not the only character to feel compassion which turns out to be disastrous. At the climax of the play, when he has just learned that he is the child of Laius and Jocasta – that is, the child who was exposed many years ago – Oedipus asks

the Herdsman why he had given the baby up in the first place. The Herdsman answers:

*Through pity, master, thinking that he would bear the child away to another land, where he himself was from. But he saved it for a most evil fate. For if you are the same man that he says you are, know that you were born to an evil destiny.*

The circle of Oedipus' life is now complete – he is, as the Herdsman says, the same man that he has been looking for all along, and as an adult he now discovers his true origin as a baby. But so too the play comes full circle: the pity of Oedipus with which it opened began a quest that has now ended in the revelation of the Herdsman's crucial act of pity – an act which, years ago, permitted the continuation of Oedipus' life which has now been brought, thanks to his own pity, to this most dreadful point.

Thus pity has crucial consequences at two separate beginnings: the start of Oedipus' life, and the start of the play which tells the story of that life. We may think of the Greek fondness for identifying the 'beginning of evils' (ἀρχὴ κακῶν) – the first act, often far in the past, that caused some present disaster. Usually this first act is somehow violent or immoral, as suits the consequences for which it would be remembered. Sophocles, by contrast, confronts us with a disaster caused by natural human reactions of kindness and altruism.

### An emotional play

Even by the standards of Greek tragedy, the impact of this play is particularly bleak. At the very moment when the audience are consumed with compassion at the destruction of the innocent Oedipus, Sophocles shows how that precise emotion can be far more destructive than any mere act of violence or aggression. It is a cliché that Greek tragedy is based on the punishment of *hybris* with *nemesis* – but this is a modern cliché, which is not supported by our texts. Tragedy in Sophocles cannot be avoided by the simple expedient of doing the right thing – indeed, in *Oedipus the King*, obeying one's natural instincts seems to be the most perilous course of all. What that implies about the kind of universe, the kind of gods, envisioned by Sophocles and his audience does not bear thinking about. Yet an audience which sees how the sincere and moving compassion felt by Oedipus and the herdsman leads to such disastrous consequences is thereby confronted by disconcerting questions. Can it be prudent to pity the fallen Oedipus when pity had such a role in bringing him to such a pitiable state? And what does it

say about the nature of tragedy, that it seems to produce in its audience precisely the emotion which *Oedipus the King* has shown to be so catastrophic?

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